

Intensive Programs of Growth—the Path to Sustainability (II)

In its Ridván 2007 message the Universal House of Justice explained that where the “framework for action” of the Five Year Plan has been “applied coherently in all its dimensions in a cluster, steady progress is being achieved.” Issue #15 of this newsletter began to explore some of these dimensions, focusing on their relationship to building up sustainable, intensive programs of growth. In this edition the focus will be on the learning that has taken place regarding two important aspects of the Plan’s framework: *cluster reflection meetings and the involvement of Local Spiritual Assemblies*.

For both topics some of the accounts are from clusters where the believers are preparing for intensive programs of growth, and not just from ones with programs already in progress. Friends in these “B” clusters have carefully assessed the strengths and weaknesses of their reflection meetings and applied the learning toward their improvement, an orientation that helps to lay a solid foundation for the launch of their growth program. Many advanced clusters with intensive programs of growth under way have yet to adopt a learning mode regarding their reflection meetings, which sometimes has resulted in gatherings with diminished spirit and focus. It is one thing to recognize that there need to be “serious consultation” and “joyous celebration” but quite another to bring them about. These are not elements that can be left to chance. What types of questions should be prepared in advance to stimulate and guide the consultation of the believers? How can experiences be shared in a way that reinforces the skills and insights that need to be gained? What achievements are celebrated and in what way? How can the arts be used to enhance understanding and uplift the spirits and not merely to entertain?

Concerning the second topic, the involvement of Local Spiritual Assemblies is becoming a more integral part of the framework for action insofar as they are fostering the processes of systematic growth. Experience varies according to the nature of the local community and is still very preliminary. However, it is apparent from the stories in this issue that when Local Assembly members grasp the vision of the Plan and work “shoulder to shoulder” with the believers in their locality, the growth process takes on a new dynamic. The Local Assemblies realize that they are not in competition with the cluster agencies and, likewise, the cluster agencies understand that their work is made easier and more successful when the Assemblies are actively engaged in this common enterprise.

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Improving Reflection Meetings: *In the first-hand accounts that follow, the friends describe how collaborative planning, an atmosphere of encouragement, and a focus on participation can lead to more productive, enjoyable, and better attended reflection gatherings.*

Niger

This account highlights the necessity of good collaboration and planning, including identifying in advance the believers who have relevant and illuminating experiences to share.

The friends have learned a lot at the reflection meetings in **Niamey** over the past five years. We began without knowing exactly what to do with the few human resources we had or how to create enthusiasm at these meetings. At the beginning, the Area

Teaching Committee met to draw up a medium-term plan and to determine the objectives to be accomplished; however, we often left the meetings very disappointed seeing how different our understanding was of the process of growth taking place. Also, the friends frequently focused on what had not worked well with the plan drawn up at the previous reflection meeting.

As the number of friends involved in the institute process increased, a unity of vision began to emerge in the cluster and finally it “clicked” after an in-depth study of the 27 December 2005 message of the Universal House of Justice during a cluster meeting with the Counsellor at the end of January 2006. The first reflection gathering, two months after this meeting, was a total success. Several new elements were introduced:

- a preliminary meeting of the Cluster Development Committee with the institute coordinators and the Auxiliary Board member;
- an emphasis on *encouragement* by identifying in advance friends who had successful experiences with the activities and asking them to share these experiences with others;
- a careful choice of texts to be read to strengthen a unified vision; and
- a PowerPoint presentation on the activities being carried out.

Then the objectives of the next plan were revealed and commitments pledged in a joyful, spiritual atmosphere. All that we see in the cluster today—the number of tutors has more than doubled in less than a year, the core activities have multiplied, and a great enthusiasm prevails among the friends—is the result of this learning process.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

A Counsellor reports on the factors contributing to effective reflection meetings in a cluster engaged in an intensive program of growth.

The success of the reflection meetings in **Lubumbashi** is due, first, to the preparations made by the cluster agencies and second, to a raising of awareness on the part of the believers by the Local Spiritual Assemblies to ensure strong participation. Also, the atmosphere is very lively, thanks to the participation of three choirs from the cluster. The Assemblies financially support not only the social portion during the reflection meeting, but also all the teaching campaigns. During the reflection meeting, we avoid presenting a lot of statistical tables to the participants. We limit ourselves only to the results achieved during the previous cycle and we propose the objectives of the following cycle in order to allow the participants to actively participate in the consultations.

Tonga

In this Pacific island cluster, a Counsellor reports that the friends gave special thought to what and how they wanted to celebrate during their reflection meeting.

On Sunday, 22 July 2007, the **Tongatapu** cluster celebrated completion of the 3rd cycle of its growth program with about 170 adults, youths, junior youths, and children participating. It was truly a joyous celebration as the reports that were presented by the statistics officer showed that 20 out of 21 teaching teams had surpassed their goals. Tears of joyful emotions were being shed as the results were reported. The organizing group had purchased 21 cakes with a candle on each. As the names of the teams were called, they were presented with a cake. Eventually all the representatives of the teams were

carrying cakes with lighted candles on them, which were then shared with everyone. Another interesting point is that gifts of prayer books and other materials were given to the new believers who numbered more than 25 for this cycle, including two or three reaffirmations. Unfortunately, quite a few of the new believers were not present, which indicates that greater care needs to be taken to ensure that the new believers are picked up and brought to such programs. Still, many of them were present and one guest family even signed their cards at the reflection meeting. I have never been to a Bahá'í program with so many people whom I did not recognize. It was overwhelmingly exciting to see the friends moving forward with the Plan and seeing the fruits of their actions.

Pakistan

After a disappointing reflection gathering in a previous cycle, the cluster agencies gave greater attention to preparations. Well-planned devotions and teaching stories as well as the active support of the Local Spiritual Assembly contributed to the success of the next reflection meeting.

As planned by the cluster agencies, we had our reflection meeting in **Islamabad** on 18 May 2007. Every effort was made to make the occasion a “joyous celebration” with “serious consultation” about the Five Year Plan. Despite rain and hailstorm, over 40 attended the meeting. The participants were members of the institutions—including seven members of the Local Spiritual Assembly—and other Bahá'í friends.

The meeting started with a devotional program followed by a deepening session on the importance of reflection meetings. The institute coordinator and the cluster facilitator presented the current statistics of the cluster. Experience sharing was an exciting part of the meeting where the friends recounted their recent teaching activities. Before dinner, which was arranged by the Local Assembly, the friends consulted on the goals of the 3rd cycle. We have pledged to teach 130 souls during the two-week expansion phase.

The hall was specially decorated with quotations from the Ridván 2007 message on the importance of teaching the Cause. The seating arrangement was changed to a circle, which made the friends feel closer and the consultation more effective. Inspirational video presentations on teaching and the Five Year Plan were shown. The youth prepared songs for the occasion and one recited a poem he had written. All these things added to the excitement and joy of the gathering.

United States

This account demonstrates the value of utilizing a reflection meeting to give focus to a particular aspect of the framework for action of the Plan.

In the **Boston** cluster we chose devotional meetings to focus on at our reflection meeting because the correlation between those who had completed Book 1 and the number hosting devotional meetings is the weakest among the core activities, and because devotional gatherings present an easier and quicker way to expose new friends to the Creative Word than perhaps study circles, which have been easier to start in the cluster.

We kicked off the last reflection meeting by setting up small tables and asked the friends to pray together in small groups. It was a very effective message from the cluster agencies and an important experience for many of the friends, who can forget how simple

it is to host a devotional meeting. This part was followed by reflection/journal writing by all of the friends about prayer meetings in the cluster and how they see their support for them developing over the next three months. These initial steps, combined with success stories and offers to accompany the friends by the cluster agencies, were a huge part of bringing about the results we have seen thus far.

Some brief snippets follow on approaches used in clusters to make their reflection meetings more effective and enjoyable:

- **Colombia.** In the **Norte de Bolívar** cluster the believers felt that their gatherings only focused on the shortcomings of the cluster. They tried focusing instead on victories and found that attendance went up and that the gatherings were more fruitful.
- **India.** In clusters where the friends must travel long distances to the gathering, such as in **Bihar Sharif**, a festive meal is included as part of the program, which, of course, enhances the feeling of fellowship permeating the event.
- **United Kingdom.** The friends in the **Greater London** cluster make extensive use of the arts and have had films created just for the reflection gatherings. Further, they have found that it helps to have a program for children running concurrently with the program for the youth and adults. The children and junior youth also make presentations to the gathering, which lifts everyone's spirits.

***Involvement of Local Spiritual Assemblies:** The growing participation of Local Assemblies in the promotion of the cluster plans has not only helped to stimulate individual initiative and increase core activities in clusters striving toward intensive programs of growth but has also proved important in advanced clusters where large-scale expansion is taking place. There the cluster agencies are devolving onto the Assemblies an increasing number of lines of action and relying on them to welcome and deepen new believers.*

Brazil

An Auxiliary Board member shared a report from an assistant that describes how a community has become reinvigorated by the strong commitment of the Local Assembly to the framework of the Plan.

Anyone now participating in the community activities of **Lauro de Freitas** feels a new spirit, a new spiritual energy... The children's classes, devotional gatherings, junior youth groups, and Nineteen Day Feasts have grown in happiness and radiance... The friends feel the "difference" and understand the reason for this wonderful atmosphere. All nine members of the Local Assembly are fully involved in all these activities. And that institutional involvement is like a magnet which attracts the friends of the community to be part of the activities that are held.

The members of this blessed Assembly are children's class teachers, junior youth animators, tutors of study circles, hosts of devotional gatherings; they carry out home visits, participate in teaching teams and together study the intensive courses in order to advance in the sequence. Six of the members have already finished the sequence, five are studying Book 5 intensively in order to become animators, and two are studying Book 6.

The main topic in the Assembly's meetings is the growth of the Faith in the cluster. The focus of its consultations is the Five Year Plan. Everyone in Lauro de Freitas is feeling more love and unity of vision. Who can doubt that this is the fruit of the divine confirmations resulting from the focus seen in our Local Assembly?

Cambodia

Almost all the Local Assembly members in the **Battambang** cluster are active participants in the core activities. The majority of the members have completed the full sequence of courses and utilize the capabilities they have acquired in the courses to serve the community. The Assemblies are promoting the multiplication of core activities in their area. They facilitate the endeavors of the friends, encourage and guide them, and allocate resources for activities. Every Local Assembly has a local fund and is self-supporting. Since the houses in Battambang are small, Nineteen Day Feasts are held in sectors. The Local Assembly deputizes members to attend the sector meetings and to share news and reports. In some communities, a newsletter is prepared so that news about the intensive program of growth is shared with all sectors.

United States

This extract from the *North Star* newsletter confirms that one should not underestimate the impact of the institute process on the perspective of the Local Assembly and its members and on the Assembly's effectiveness in promoting community solidarity and growth.

As the Local Assembly members in **Philadelphia** went through the institute courses, they gradually began to see community development in new ways—and the functioning of the Assembly began to change. “We began to look at every item on our agenda in terms of the spiritual principles involved and its relationship to growth,” explained one Assembly member. “The training of the Ruhi sequence gave us that perspective.”

By prioritizing for growth, the Assembly began to move away from a complex organizational structure to one that involved simple acts of service with community members and seekers. “The Local Spiritual Assembly is trying to develop a closer relationship with the community. We want to get away from a congregational model of leadership to a service model where the Assembly and community work together and teach together,” said the Secretary.

As the Assembly allowed the Five Year Plan to impact its priorities, it made adjustments and changes to its operations, for example:

- *Unity*: The Assembly now views every opportunity or challenge as a chance to learn about unity and to advance the progress of the cluster.
- *Agenda*: Rather than start with minutes and reports, the Assembly begins with a deepening on the recent letters from the Universal House of Justice or *Reflections on Growth* from the International Teaching Center. Next the Assembly consults about cluster advancement and teaching. The Assembly then takes community-specific items, such as personal issues or requests from individuals.
- *Committees*: The Assembly reduced the number of its committees to free people to do core activities. Small task forces of one or two people now handle key community functions, such as Feasts or Holy Days. Structures are created only as a response to actual needs.

- o *Budget:* The budget is looked at in the context of the Plan. The cost of its Bahá'í Center remains a monthly issue but the Assembly prioritizes funds for the Area Teaching Committee, neighborhood children's classes and teaching projects.
- o *Nineteen Day Feasts:* Consultations have improved and are now a real exchange of ideas and best practices from community and Assembly members who are actively engaged in core activities. Youth are attending regularly and there is a warm, loving atmosphere.
- o *Deploying Human Resources:* Instead of appointing a committee and hoping for the best, the Assembly now uses home visits and personal contact to accompany community members in their activities.
- o *Facts and Figures:* The Assembly uses data and available human resources to inform decision making rather than relying on pet theories or historical precedents. Collaborating regularly with the Area Teaching Committee, the institute coordinator and Auxiliary Board members has also become a regular part of the Assembly's activity.

Following are a few brief excerpts from reports that illustrate how Local Spiritual Assemblies are guiding the friends in carrying out the activities of the Plan, often through their own example:

- **Australia.** After many members of the Local Spiritual Assembly of **Holdfast Bay** attended a mini-workshop on teaching teams and their cluster (**Adelaide**) reflection meeting, the Assembly had detailed discussions about teaching teams. The teams were re-formed so that each member of the Assembly was on a team. And at the Feast the Assembly gave extensive time during the consultation period to discuss teaching team activities and how to move ahead systematically.
- **Kenya.** When the Local Spiritual Assembly of **Nairobi** invited the new declarants and their families to a reception, this led to five more declarations because the family members and friends of the new believers decided to accept the Faith.
- **United States.** The Local Spiritual Assembly of **South DeKalb**, Georgia, had planned to spend five hours on Sunday afternoon to clear its agenda in order to have more time for the Five Year Plan. Then, on Saturday afternoon the Assembly members heard a talk by a Counsellor in which he said that if a Local Assembly doesn't feel it has enough time, what it should do is to turn its agenda upside down and deal with the last item of the agenda first, which is usually teaching. So, one of the members of the Assembly came to the next meeting with an upside down agenda. The other members asked, "What is this?" He said, "The agenda recommended by the Counsellor." The Assembly then spent four of the five hours consulting about the Five Year Plan, examined the list of community members, and divided it among the members for doing home visits.

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